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AUTHOR Perrine, Byron K.
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ABSTRACT

Techniques learned in the Goethe-Institut German classroom in Germany, are described and recommended for American use, particularly the immersion approach and emphasis on variety in instructional activities. Other features are also discussed, including: the role of a teacher's willingness to provide multi-sensory activities, creative use of the basal text, individualized instruction, an emphasis on proficiency rather than simply earning credits, ways to "de-mystify" foreign language, and networking with professional organizations and cultural ministries. Implications of the new Europe of 1992 for language learning are noted. (LB)

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WHAT WORKS IN MY CLASSROOM

Ideas for Content Design Team for the 1991 Foreign Language Professional Development Seminar

Presented to KET October 25, 1991

by Byron K. Perrine, Ph. D.
German Language Instructor, and
Assistant Principal for Teacher Evaluation and Supervision

Oneida Baptist Institute
Oneida, Kentucky 40972

Shortly after having joined the staff of Oneida Baptist Institute in the spring of 1989, a decision was made that I would become trained to fill the position of German instructor, as our school had been without a German instructor for two years. This would be an ideal half-time position for me, the rest of my day being spent in teacher observation, evaluation, supervision, and coordinating our school's Teacher Internship Program. Not having been previously trained in the German language, it was necessary for me to learn very rapidly, not only the language itself but also appropriate instructional techniques to be used in my own classroom. A decision was made that I train with the renowned Goethe-Institut in Germany during the summer of 1989, and begin teaching on an emergency basis beginning the fall term, 1989. The following summer I returned to Germany for additional training, and have now completed additional training through correspondence with the University of Kentucky, the University of Wisconsin, and Eastern Kentucky University.

This unusual, if not unique, set of circumstances has occasioned many advantages. Having been previously trained in educational administration and being employed at the time as a teacher supervisor allowed me to

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observe my own learning process in Germany from the perspective both of a student and a practicing school administrator. In short, this opportunity to observe and experience first hand the instructional techniques used with beginning students at the Goethe-Institut in Germany has shaped my understanding and practice of instructional methodology as far as the teaching of foreign language is concerned.

The essential elements of instruction at the Goethe-Institut in Germany, as I understand them, are:

1. Instruction entirely in German from day one (necessitated by the fact that classes are made up of students from all over the world and there is, therefore, no other common language.)

2. Variety, variety, variety, in instructional activities! A rapid-fire sequence of short and varied learning activities of about 15 minutes each provide varied stimuli--auricular, visual, and tactile. Learning activities and curricular materials are designed to reach into the mind, and provide associative experiences that enable the student to remember what he/she is learning.

As a learner not too far removed from the initial learning process, I can still remember the time, place, and circumstance when I first learned various German words. Indeed, it is precisely because of an associated experience that I learned and still remember the vocabulary today. Words associated with a particular experience are easier to remember than abstract words. The Goethe-Institut instructional technique provided during the course of a typical day rich and varied stimuli by which some aspect of the German language was associated in the learner's mind with a specific concrete learning experience thus becoming an internalized foundation upon which considerable proficiency in the language can be acquired. These same instructional techniques can be used in the American classroom.

During a typical day at the Goethe-Institut the learner might be exposed to dictation/translation exercises, listening, reading, small and large group discussion, role playing, small group dramatization, essay writing, questioning and answering activities, games, and songs, sometimes all within the space of a single 45 minute instructional period. I have tried to utilize this same model in my own classroom, and find that as a result my students are learning German and enjoying the process.

Next in importance to the teacher's willingness and ability to provide well-planned and varied multi-sensory learning activities in the classroom is, I believe, the basal textbook selected for use in the classroom. While no teacher should rely entirely upon the textbook, a textbook, when carefully selected, provides an excellent standardized scope and sequence which should not be ignored, especially by the beginning teacher. The foreign language instructor should explore the many possibilities for creatively utilizing the basal text. A well-designed basal text will lend itself well to this sort of thing, and tends to provide balance and focus in the instructional process.

On the other hand, scope and sequence must constantly be atuned by the individual teacher in order to match the special characteristics of each group of learners. As every experienced teacher knows, no two groups of students learn at the same rate. We, as teachers, must take each group of students where they are and work from there rather than insisting upon "lock-step" instructional patterns. And we must provide opportunities for enriched learning experience when student interest and aptitude warrants.

Individualized instruction has an important role to play in achieving higher levels of foreign language proficiency, both in terms of

providing remediation for the slower learner, and in providing challenge and enrichment for the highly motivated and able learner. My favorite individual learning resources include computer games such as "Vocabulary on the Attack" and "Hansi--Ein Spiel mit Praepositionen" developed by the Goethe-Institut and marketed in the United States by Langenscheid. There is also available a number of excellent graded readers with listening tapes, such as the mystery stories available from EMC Corporation, Saint Paul, Minnesota. These readers with taped transcript are excellent for building vocabulary, as they sustain student interest over a long period of time and introduce students to extensive vocabulary in a memorable context throughout.

I believe that every foreign language student ought to be encouraged to work toward proficiency in the language rather than simply toward the goal of earning two credits on his/her high school transcript. Motivating the student to work toward this end requires that the teacher make every effort to "de-mystify" foreign language. The study of foreign language is no more difficult than any other learning activity, if properly taught. Uniform standards of proficiency for lst, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students should be set, and high school students should, whenever possible, be encouraged to take A. P. examinations in foreign language, and other standardized tests, such as the "Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache" offered by the Goethe-Institut.

We, as a profession, need to reorient our own attitudes and thinking about foreign language study. In this day of ever increasing global economic interdependence, the study of foreign language is no longer a "liberal arts study" for personal enrichment, on the contrary it is

a functional necessity affecting our nation's future economic security. It is my opinion that all talented students ought to be encouraged while in high school to start thinking about pursuing further in-depth foreign language study at the college/university level.

As part of my personal effort to "de-mystify" foreign language, I constantly stress to my students the close relationship of the German and English languages. For example, I take every opportunity to point out the "cognates", and that English "D" is frequently equivalent to German "T", etc. In explaining the historical link between the German and English languages, I have found the PBS video The Story of English, Part I, to be particularly helpful and use it with almost every beginning class. I would think that this same video would be equally helpful in beginning French classes.

A variety of other excellent free audio-visual materials is available for the German teacher from the following sources:

The Center for Media
Putnam-Northern Westchester BOCES
School Services Building
Yorktown Heights, New York 10598

Inter Nationes
Kennedyallee 91-103
D-5300 Bonn 2
F. R. G.

Language teaching, if well done, must be a "networking" activity. Various professional organizations print helpful instructional tips, latest research contributions to the field, and keep the teacher updated as to various opportunities for personal professional growth. I have found my participation with American Association of Teachers of German, 112 Haddontowne Court #104, Cherry Hill, NJ 08034, to be invaluable.

The teacher who networks not only profits through the shared experiences of her colleagues, but also enriches her profession by actively sharing what she has learned in her own classroom.

I also suggest that teachers establish personal ties directly with the various "culteral ministries" and/or quasi-governmental bureaus of appropriate foreign governments. The Goethe-Institut, for example, encourages professional growth among German teachers in the United States by providing what I consider to be extremely valuable regional workshops on a regular basis, and by providing scholarships for teachers to study in Germany. Information regarding these opportunities is available from any of the branch offices of the Goethe-Institut, or by writing to:

Goethe-Institut Zentralverwaltung
Balanstraße 57
D-8000 München 90
F. R. G.

Regarding specific things that KET and/or other community groups and organizations might do to encourage the study of foreign language, certainly professional development seminars such as the one that we are in the process of planning are helpful. I would also like to see a different type of programming brought into the American home to supplement that which is now available in the classroom. In my opinion, we need much more "entertainment" type foreign language programming broadcast so as to be available in the student's home; e.g. ALF or Magnum P. I. dubbed in the foreign language. Though many students today no longer have the time to watch television recreationally, television can still on occasion provide an alternative recreational activity which might be chosen if the programming were of high recreational interest. Providing this type of

recreation option would be, in my opinion, a valid purpose for educational television. If the student has only an hour or so available for recreational purposes, he/she might well choose to include such programming in his/her busy schedule as an alternative while rejecting as a matter of course programming of a more traditional nature. For those who might argue that a foreign culture ought to be taught "pure" and "unadulterated", I can only say, "Wake up!". We are living in an increasingly international culture. Language study today is functional, not esthetic. Changing economic realities and the growing need in our society for citizens with functional levels of foreign language proficiency has necessitated this change in attitude. I see absolutely nothing wrong in re-broadcasting in a foreign language American favorites such as Magnum P. I. (These same programs are also European favorites.)

European students are being encouraged to support the impending economic union of European states scheduled for 1992. Already delegates are being elected to the European Parliment. Common European taxes and currency are scheduled for 1992. Clearly the Europe of tomorrow promises to be a major economic competitor. Already, nearly half of the world's commerical satelites are launched by the cooperative efforts of European nations.

A young Chinese businessman with whom I visited while studying in 1989 in Germany commented: Asia is preparing to shift its major market from the U. S. to the united Europe of 1992.

The assistant general manager of a major Japanese computer firm who was also in Germany the summer of 1992 supervising construction of a new computer assembly plant there, told me that in Germany their firm is

able to hire high school graduates capable of working at a level comparable to college graduates in the U. S., and that is why they have chosen to build in Germany rather than in the U. S.

Clearly the United States if facing a major economic challenge, and today's high school students once they graduate will face an ever more competitive labor market in which foreign language skills will be increasingly important. If necessity is the parent of invention, then I suspect that competency education is about to come of age in America, and that its application will in no area be no more important than in the instruction of international languages.